

# Brenda Squirrell Wears Many Hats



"I think it was my destiny," GPO Human Capital Specialist (Benefits) Brenda Squirrell says of spending the last 42 years working at GPO. "The employees and customers keep me going. They keep me on my toes with my craft."

Squirrell first joined GPO in November 1977 as a Personnel Clerk and quickly rose through the ranks. She was first promoted to Personnel Assistant in staffing, a role in which she wrote vacancy announcements, hired employees, and gave out the civil service test. The Civil Service Entrance Exam was introduced in 1955. It was a proctored, pencil-and-paper test that thousands of

Americans took each year to get Federal jobs. Squirrell took the Clerk Typist test herself when she applied to work at GPO.

"You had to type 40 words per minute with no more than three errors," Squirrell explains. "In one classroom, you took the regular test. Then they took you to another classroom for the typing portion where they had typewriters set up. You could also bring your own typewriter, which is what I did because I could type faster on my own typewriter. I was able to join GPO as a Personnel Clerk typing because I passed the typing test."

The original civil service test was thrown out

after a lawsuit found that it discriminated against minority groups. Today, there is no longer a mandatory single civil service exam to cover all federal jobs.

Squirrell was later promoted to Personnel Assistant in Retirement. Eventually, the department changed its name from Personnel to Human Capital and her title shifted to Human Capital Specialist (Retirement).

Fast forward to 2020 and today Brenda works as a Human Capital Specialist wearing many hats (literally). In this role, she assists teammates who walk into the office with questions about their benefits and retirement. She teaches important classes that help GPO teammates know how to navigate their Employee Personal Page (EPP), how to fill out a retirement application, and much more. She writes standard operating procedures, policies and directives for teammates to follow. She handles the health benefits programs, and Federal Employees' Group Life Insurance (FEGLI) as well as retirement programs

such as Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS) and Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS). Squirrell also takes care of records management, maintaining employee records. She even assisted her own husband, who she met at GPO, in his retirement from the agency after he worked as an Offset Pressman for 30 years.

"Retirement has taken on a whole new dimension since I first started," says Squirrell. "It's more than just talking about retirement. It involves holding classes, putting out directives, talking to employees. We're moving onward and upward. The Supervisory Human Capital Specialist Crystal Robinson has helped us pave that new path to help our employees and customers."

Squirrell says that Human Capital quickly embraced working virtually during the coronavirus pandemic and has remained business as usual.

"We do our whole employee onboarding presentation that we typically do, except instead of doing it in the classroom, now we do it over Skype," says







Squirrell. “The IT team has been wonderful in helping us get it set up. We do a dress rehearsal first. We still bring on everyone we need to present at orientation, including people from Payroll, General Counsel, and many others.”

Squirrell says during the pandemic she and the Human Capital team have also worked to hold Skype classes they held in person prior to coronavirus hitting. These include sessions on how to fill out a disability retirement application, how to fill out a FERS and CSRS retirement application, and more.

As far as her many famous hats, Squirrell says she hopes to bring a little bit of joy to GPO.

“Just to see an employee smile makes my day,” Squirrell says. “And maybe I can try to make their day too.”

Squirrell first wore a hat to a Career Service Award ceremony in 2008.

“The first hat I wore was red with flowers,” says Squirrell. “I thought I would

do it just to wear one and then I really started to like wearing my hats to work. It was just something different.”

Squirrell finds her hats at a variety of places, including flea markets, thrift stores, and JCPenney. She also has custom-designed hats from a hat shop in Silver Spring, MD.

“The designer would show me a design and draw something up for me,” says Squirrell.



**GPO Human Capital Specialist (Benefits) Brenda Squirrell wore a red and black hat to the first Career Service Award in 2008.**



**Squirrell estimates that she owns 70 hats or more, including fascinators and what she calls “funny hats” and “serious hats”.**

Squirrell loves travelling and packs hats according to her destination.

“When I went to Dubai, I took a big sun hat because the sun is strong over there,” Squirrell says. “I also took a white one that looks like a crown.”

While travelling to Alaska, she learned something because of her hats.

“I wore a penguin hat in Alaska,” said Squirrell. “A woman stopped me and told me I had the wrong hat on because there are no penguins in Alaska.”

Squirrell says her hats also help GPO retirees who may still need her knowledge spot her around town.

“Whether I’m in the Safeway, or walking, or at my gym, there are GPO retirees out there who have been retired for years and still have questions about retirement,” says Squirrell. “So I wear a hat for those people who have retired in case they need to find me and ask me questions.”

Squirrell figuratively wears many other hats outside GPO as well. At the LEONAs Gallery in Maryland, she sews quilts, clothes, and lately, face masks for nursing home residents.

And though she wears many hats, Squirrell describes everyone in Human Capital as hard-working, dedicated individuals, and says it’s teamwork that has made Human Capital move to higher grounds.

“In Human Capital, we all work as one unit together to make sure we get the job done for the employees at GPO and our customers,” says Squirrell.



#### *Editor’s Note:*

*This is part of a series of articles focused on employees with 40+ years of Federal service. We look forward to sharing their GPO experience with you. — Michelle R. Overstreet.*